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‘In a small mill-race severed from his stream’: Wordsworth’s Undaunted Rivers¹

Ralph Pite

In a well-known passage from the concluding book of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth draws a comparison between the development of his imaginative powers, over the course of the life he has narrated, and the journey a river follows, from source to sea.

we have traced the stream
From darkness and the very place of birth
In its blind cavern, whence is faintly heard
The sound of waters; followed it to light
And open day, accompanied its course
Among the ways of nature, afterwards
Lost sight of it bewildered and engulfed,
Then given it greeting as it rose once more
With strength, reflecting in its solemn breast
The works of man and face of human life;
And lastly, from its progress have we drawn
The feeling of life endless, the great thought
By which we live, infinity and God.

Prelude (1805), 13. 172-84²

A child grows to adulthood, ages and passes into death, as a stream broadens into a river and enters the ocean; the child’s imagination is born in the heights (as if in Plato’s cave), nourished by ‘the ways of Nature’, then later re-shaped and challenged by encounters with the ‘face of human life’ until it attains, at last, an apprehension of the whole – of infinity contained by God.

The comparison is time-honoured and frequently employed by Wordsworth’s contemporaries. His own later work, *The River Duddon: A Series of Sonnets* (1820) is fashioned by the same overarching simile.³ The Duddon, rising among the Furness Fells, in the heart of the Lake District, flows south and enters the Irish Sea at a point between Barrow-in-Furness and Millom. Wordsworth depicts the river’s journey as beginning high up in wild mountains, descending through farmland and leading out into the sea; the river is born, enjoys a childhood in nature, enters the social world and, lastly, will ‘mingle with Eternity’. The series of sonnets repeats the pattern Wordsworth describes in *The Prelude*. Within the critical tradition, however, *The River Duddon* has usually suffered by the comparison, its similarities to Wordsworth’s autobiographical masterpiece confirming the decline in his poetic powers from his forties on.⁴ In what follows, I will suggest that these sonnets disclose unexpected energy and inventiveness, being at once reflective, playful and disruptive. As in *The Excursion* (1814) and in his revisions to *The Prelude* (1850), Wordsworth can be seen as intent upon challenging and interrupting both his reader’s and his own habits of mind.⁵ Rather than being no more than elegiac, minor key reworkings of earlier masterpieces, these poems from his later career are coloured by their originating motive: a determination to move onward still.

Furthermore, how a person understands their progress through time naturally affects their sense of other processes of change. In Wordsworth’s case, his views about England’s progress and the centralisation which accompanies it are cognate with his resistance to the prospect of the self’s individual history being subsumed into pattern. They are in line also with his reluctance to allow his mature poetry to become excessively smooth and polished, even while he deployed in it, as he had not done so readily before, the forms and diction of canonical literature. The style of these poems corresponds, therefore, to Wordsworth’s sense of the duties of the mature person, facing the weaknesses that come with age. The directness of the poetry seeks, in other words, to be

invigorating more than authoritative, provocative rather than absolute. It brings with it a challenge not only to the complacencies of middle-age but also to the geography of progress, and the place that rivers occupy in depictions of national advancement. Lastly, Wordsworth's unruly style reflects the ways in which liquids flow. The poems are like a river in their turbulence, their eddying forms and their suggestion of liquids' particulate nature.

and plunged and basked again

In book 1 of *The Prelude*, Wordsworth recalls his childhood in Cockermouth, with the river Derwent running behind the house.

Oh, many a time have I, a five years' child,
In a small mill-race severed from his stream,
Made one long bathing of a summer's day;
Basked in the sun, and plunged and basked again
Alternate, all a summer's day, or scoured
The sandy fields, leaping through flowery groves
Of yellow ragwort

Prelude I, ll. 288-94 (1850)

Wordsworth's revisions for the 1850 text of the poem are seen, almost invariably, as uninspired and diminishing (in line with the received idea of his career as a whole). In this case, the differences between the two versions of this passage are minor and, arguably, the latter version is an improvement. In 1805, the last lines read:

or coursed
Over the sandy fields, leaping through groves
Of yellow groundsel

Prelude I, ll. 296-8 (1805)⁶

Groundsel (spelt 'grunsel' in some of Wordsworth's manuscripts) and ragwort are similar plants – both are wildflowers, growing in disturbed ground, which were often thought of as weeds and later categorised as noxious weeds because of their containing an alkaloid poisonous to horses and cattle. Wordsworth makes the change more for verbal than botanical reasons: 'ragwort' does not alliterate with 'groves' as 'groundsel' does. It stands out, particularly after the added 'flowery'. The banks of the Derwent cannot boast flowery groves of asphodel but ones of yellow ragwort, that tatty flower. The change of register across the line-end is one of the many mock-epic disruptions in the *Prelude*. It works to parody the heroic imaginings of boyhood – thinking of oneself on a knight-errant's quest as one scampers through the local fields – but it does so in an affectionate spirit.⁷

The same mock-epic gesture simultaneously credits these dreams of youth as being not only an innocent but a true account, from the boy's eye-view and at the child's scale, of the world that stretches out around him. This trace of comedy and polemic – linked as it is to Wordsworth's concern to validate the child over the adult – is achieved through the disruption he causes at the line-ending. That quality of self-interruption is made more prominent by coming so soon after Wordsworth's evocation of the Derwent's 'voice | That flowed along my dreams' and 'with its steady cadence [...] composed my thoughts | To more than infant softness'. Likewise, with the change from 'coursed' to 'scoured' Wordsworth pushes his diction to an extreme that interrupts his flow. The word is closer to boyhood's hunting instincts than 'wandered' might be or 'roved'. It possesses heightened impact, by comparison with 'coursed', rather as 'ragwort' is, in its sound and connotations, more 'unpleasing' than 'groundsel'.

There is something comparably animalistic, even sinister about 'basked' and 'plunged' and

'basked again', as if Wordsworth were rather like an indolent crocodile. The description does not contradict his recollection of making the 'summer's day' into 'one long bathing'. Rather, moving in and out is the only way to create that continuousness, unless you are a cross-channel swimmer or actually a fish. Still, there is a pull in feeling here – between, on the one hand, 'one long bathing of a summer's day', with its repetition a moment later, 'all a summer's day', both of which conjure up the drift and dreamy, pastoral changelessness of that whole and, on the other hand, the boy's vigorous, eager movement constantly plunging in and climbing back out of the water. The juxtaposition of these two feelings is highlighted by the internal rhyme of 'Alternate' and 'all' and by the repetition of 'summer's day' before and after 'Basked [...] and plunged and basked again'. In the sequence of the lines, it is as if the idyllic summing up of the day in memory framed and held its energies.⁸

These changes give the impression of Wordsworth's seeking to heighten the palette of his language, and thus make the unevenness of his past life more palpable. They suggest that in revising the poem he was less concerned to be unambiguous than determined that his inconsistencies should be unmistakable. In this example, the vigour created by Wordsworth's unsteady cadences extends to a suggestion of violence – not only the 'naked savage, in the thunder shower' as this verse-paragraph ends, but the 'small mill-race *severed* from his stream' (my emphasis).⁹

when the hair was shed Upon the flowing stream

Cockermouth contained in Wordsworth's day several mills, powered by water-wheels. Remains of Roman mills have been found a little downstream of the modern town and commercially viable mills survived through the nineteenth century. Moreover, on the Derwent, as on other British rivers in the eighteenth century, weirs and mill-races were constructed in order to increase the power and reliability of water flow. These 'improvements' frequently went along with works to make rivers more navigable and they take place as the English canal system was being, forming part of the early industrial revolution. The word 'severed' appears to regret the violation of nature that industry brings: the mill-race seems orphaned, or self-alienated (severed from *his* stream, Wordsworth writes); the word-choice suggests that it has been removed from the flow of natural time and placed instead within the static, repetitious cycles of industrial production.

Such connotations for 'severed' in this line correspond to the use of word in book 4 of *The Excursion*:

take these locks of mine"—
Thus would the Votary say—"this severed hair,
My vow fulfilling, do I here present,
Thankful for my belovèd child's return.
Thy banks, Cephisus, he again hath trod,
Thy murmurs heard [...]"
And, doubtless, sometimes, when the hair was shed
Upon the flowing stream, a thought arose
Of Life continuous, Being unimpaired;
That hath been, is, and where it was and is
There shall endure,—existence unexposed
To the blind walk of mortal accident;

The Excursion, Book 4, 745-50, 753-8¹⁰

Severance (of the body and the family) is overcome by the flowing stream and, as the rupture is healed, so a sense of the continuous revives. From where it was and is, from this progress 'have we drawn | The feeling of life endless, the great thought | By which we live, infinity and God.' (*Prelude* (1805), book 13, 182-4). Yet there is also a willing repetition of severance in the sacrifice of the hair, in the deliberate 'shedding' of it (like leaves and like blood) into the flowing stream. Oddly

perhaps, awareness of continuousness is created by interruption. Something whole and unimpaired is conjured up by a sacrifice of wholeness. Because severance generates the thought of continuousness, Wordsworth highlights the contrast, and hence the poignancy of our intuition that somewhere life is unchanging and unexposed to mortal accident. Secondly, meanwhile, he suggests how this sense of continuousness arises within (and actually by means of) our changes, our moves, our plunges and basking and plunging again.

The unexpectedness of the verb is partly a consequence of changing usage. Wordsworth, unlike Coleridge, Keats, or Shelley is fond of the word, often using it in the sense of ‘divided’ (corresponding to *OED* sense 3: ‘To keep distinct or apart by an intervening space or barrier’) rather than in the more usual, physical sense of ‘cut or sliced apart’ which dominates in this passage.¹¹ Byron may have introduced the word’s more visceral inflection, which is now current: in *The Giaour*, for instance, he writes of ‘some bloody hand | Fresh sever’d from its parent limb’ and ‘the severed hand | Which quivers’. In *Don Juan* canto 8, likewise, he observes, ‘To the live leg still cling the severed head’.¹²

Rather as he uses ‘severed’ in *The Excursion*, Wordsworth uses the verb ‘cross’ at a key point in *The Prelude* where disturbance establishes, rather than breaking, continuity. When the French Revolution turned from liberty back to renewed oppression and Frenchmen ‘changed a war of self-defence | For one of conquest’, Wordsworth was traumatised: ‘confounded more and more, | Misguiding and misguided’. He was rescued, he says, by Coleridge and by his sister, Dorothy:

the beloved woman in whose sight
Those days were passed (now speaking in a voice
Of sudden admonition, like a brook
That does but cross a lonely road; and now
Seen, heard and felt, and caught at every turn,
Companion never lost through many a league)
Maintained for me a saving intercourse
With my true self.

Prelude (1805), Book 10, 792-4, 887-8, 908-15¹³

The stream first crosses the lonely road and then accompanies, ‘at every turn’, the person walking ‘many a league’ along it; their recovery of contact with the ‘true self’ is achieved in the form of an inward dialogue. The stream blocks Wordsworth’s way and then helps him forward. ‘Cross’ in personal relations and conversation may mean to challenge or question, and that requires quite frequently ‘a voice | Of sudden admonition’. In the context of speech, the word implies confrontation and Wordsworth’s ‘sudden’ registers male surprise when ‘the beloved Woman’ disputes his assumed, masculine authority.

In the 1850 text, Wordsworth emphasised the word: his ‘beloved Sister [...] speaking in a voice | Of sudden admonition—like a brook | That did but *cross* a lonely road, and now | Is seen, heard, felt, and caught at every turn’ (*Prelude* (1850), Book 11, 335-9).¹⁴ Drawing attention to the verb may be designed to alert the reader to its double meaning. However, like his changing ‘groves | Of groundsel’ to ‘flowery groves | Of ragwort’, the italics also heighten Wordsworth’s emphasis. He comes over as someone making a point forcefully; someone willing to cross his reader and disrupt their possible complacency.¹⁵

smooth enthrallment

In Book 4 of *The Prelude*, ‘Summer Vacation’, Wordsworth narrates returning home to the Lake District after a year away at University (his time there being described in book 3). ‘Great joy was mine’, Wordsworth writes, on revisiting the house where he grew up and meeting the ‘old

Dame, so motherly and good' who raised him. He roams the 'rooms, the court and garden', all of them, he says, 'seeming yet my own'. He highlights:

that unruly child of mountain birth,
The froward brook, which, soon as he was boxed
Within our garden, found himself at once
As if by trick insidious and unkind,
Stripped of his voice, and left to dimple down
Without an effort and without a will,
A channel paved by the hand of man.

Prelude (1805), Book 4, 39-45

The transformation prompts Wordsworth to comparisons between himself and the tamed stream: 'Ha,' quoth I, 'pretty Prisoner, are you there!'. This was a thought which, at the time, he did not develop and that strikes him, in retrospect, as strange.

now (reviewing soberly that hour)
I marvel that a fancy did not flash
Upon me, and a strong desire, straitway –
At sight of such an emblem that showed forth
So aptly my late course of even days
And all their smooth enthrallment – to pen down
A satire on myself.

Prelude (1805), Book 4, 49-54

Cambridge had been a time of 'submissive idleness' in which 'Nine months – rolled pleasingly away'.

The memory languidly revolved, the heart
Reposed in noontide rest, the inner pulse
Of contemplation almost failed to beat.
Rotted as by a charm, my life became
A floating island, an amphibious thing,
Unsound, of spongy texture, yet withal
Not wanting a fair face of water weeds
And pleasant flowers.

Prelude (1805), Book 3, 336-43, 669, 671¹⁶

The stream's 'smooth enthrallment' as it runs through the garden offers an exact and inviting equivalent to Wordsworth's sense of himself and his recent experience: of himself as an island floating languidly and covered in pleasant flowers. He 'marvels' that he did not make more of it at the time.

His later version of the passage is, characteristically, more outspoken, equally in both its accusation and forgiveness.

Well might sarcastic Fancy then have whispered,
'An emblem here behold of thy own life;
In its late course of even days with all
Their smooth enthrallment;' but the heart was full,
Too full for that reproach.

Prelude (1850), Book 4, 60-64¹⁷

The section about the brook itself is little altered – the line ‘Without an effort and without a will’ is enclosed in brackets and, rather than ‘the hand of man’, ‘man’s officious care’ has paved the stream; otherwise Wordsworth repeats the description word for word. Here, though, the changes are greater, the criticism sharper and the stakes raised: the stream is an emblem of Wordsworth’s ‘life’ and the enjambement between ‘all’ and ‘Their smooth enthrallment’ does not allow his submissiveness to go uncriticised.

Where, however, the earlier version, ‘reviewing soberly’ the past remains astonished that this condemnation was not voiced at the time, the revised text understands: ‘the heart was full, | Too full for that reproach’. His earlier confusion, looking back at his teenage self, is resolved by this explanation and that may appear too controlling a gesture, making the self-relation of the speaker too stable. On the other hand, marvelling at it, as he did earlier in his adult life, sounds itself sarcastic. Is it not, in fact, quite unsurprising that Wordsworth at eighteen did not achieve clarity about his wayward behaviour as a first-year student? Nor feel bold enough to point a moral? There would have been, arguably, a suspect quality to any such insight – the feeling that it was facile and rehearsed. So, Wordsworth in 1805 sounds, for a moment, obtuse about himself. That obtuseness seems generated by dislike of what he once had been and suggests lingering anger at his youthful failings. The 1850 version re-enacts both the earlier sarcasm and gives the appropriate reply to it; to achieve this, Wordsworth makes the register of the lines both more highly-coloured and more varied than in 1805. They ‘cross’ the smoother movement of the earlier text, not allowing the issue hidden within its lines to remain obscured; he does not permit the narrative of his life to ‘dimple down | Without an effort’.

There is, then, vigour and forcefulness in the style of the 1850 text, which confronts at this point the resentfulness and resignation of an earlier, adult self. Wordsworth’s writing seeks, in other words, to keep ‘the unruly Child’ alive amidst the ‘smooth enthrallment’ of adult experience. He writes with such energy to prevent himself from being ‘Stripped of his voice’ and his readers from submitting to the status quo: ‘Decency and Custom starving Truth, | And blind Authority beating with his staff | The child that might have led him’.¹⁸ The unruly child is certain, nonetheless, to become ‘boxed’ and their path ‘paved’. Finding an emblem of oneself in the path of a stream involves accepting that change as unavoidable.

The stream heads to the sea; it descends from remote beginnings to settled landscapes; it widens and deepens and, ultimately, it is lost in the ocean. These transitions offer an overarching metaphor for a human life and a succession of specific opportunities to draw the comparison, and Wordsworth’s *The River Duddon* is shaped by this alignment, overall and at every turn. Yet, the inevitability of the narrative, like the naturalness of the similarities, risks becoming a further ‘smooth enthrallment’. Acceptance of the human condition and its confines may become elided with resignation and the relinquishing of one’s human powers. A sense of what one is can drift away on the stream of one’s life.

to facilitate the navigation between this place and the metropolis

In Wordsworth’s day, moreover, the pattern of a human life, seen as a stream running to the sea, was found also in the progress of nations. Wordsworth firmly establishes early on that the Duddon rises ‘remote from every taint | Of sordid industry’ but soon afterwards the river flows on past a ‘Cottage rude and grey’, and after that beside a ‘barn and byre, and spouting mill’; it is joined by a ‘Tributary Stream’ and stained by ‘Unwelcome mixtures’ from sheep-washing, until as it nears the sea:

Beneath an ampler sky a region wide
Is opened round him: - hamlets, towers, and towns,

And blue-topped hills, behold him from afar;
In stately mien to sovereign Thames allied
Spreading his bosom under Kentish downs,
With commerce freighted, or triumphant war.¹⁹

Becoming to 'sovereign Thames allied', the pastoral river joins the nation; it participates in the commerce of the national economy and its likely wars. The isolated river becomes both tributary and microcosm, its progress towards commerce repeating the nation's ascent to global power.

In Wordsworth's day, this ascent was figured particularly through the Thames itself. Completed in 1789, the Thames and Severn Canal joined the headwaters of the Thames to the lower reaches of the Severn, traversing the Cotswold hills via the Sapperton Tunnel, which was at the time the longest canal tunnel in the country. Construction of the canal formed part of a larger effort to develop the Thames for commercial purposes. In 1818, for example, a book of engravings celebrated 'the patriotic spirit':

which, in defiance of expense and almost insurmountable difficulties, has completed the canal which unites the Severn with the Thames, promises to continue its zealous and indefatigable efforts to remove every existing impediment; or, by opening new channels, to facilitate the navigation between this place and the metropolis.²⁰

Entirely unsurprisingly, making the Thames navigable continued to receive the full measure of nationalistic and imperial acclaim.

We have traced the bountiful river from the bubbling well out of which it issues, in the meadow by Trewsbury Mead – its lonely birthplace – through its whole course, gathering tributaries, and passing with them through tranquil villages, populous towns, and crowded cities; ever fertilising, ever beautifying, ever enriching, until it reaches the most populous city of the modern or the ancient world, forming thence the GREAT HIGHWAY by which a hundred Nations traverse the globe.²¹

When visiting the source of the Thames in 1809, Thomas Love Peacock wrote with characteristic wit about its rapid development. 'The Thames is almost as good a subject for a satire as a panegyric', he told his friend, Edward Hookham:

A satirist might exclaim: The rapacity of Commerce, not content with the immense advantages derived from the river in the course of nearly 300 miles, erects a ponderous engine over the very place of it's [sic.] nativity, to suck up it's unborn waters from the bosom of the earth, and pump them into a navigable canal!

By contrast, 'A panegyrist':

after expatiating on the benefits of commercial navigation [...] to unite the two noblest rivers of this most wealthy, prosperous, happy, generous, loyal, patriotic, &c, &c, &c, kingdom of England might say: And yet this splendid undertaking would be incomplete [...] did not this noble river, this beautiful emblem, and powerful instrument, of the commercial greatness of Britain, contribute to that greatness even at the instant of it's birth, by supplying this magnificent chain of connection with the means of perpetual utility.²²

Peacock expressed his reservations and irony within the confines of a private letter; in the public arena of poetry, he removed the commercial aspect of the Thames altogether. In the same way that Wordsworth (initially at least) kept the river Duddon free 'from every taint | Of sordid industry',

Peacock's 1810 poem, 'The Genius of the Thames' finds in the river's course an image solely of the individual life:

Thames! when, beside thy secret source
Remembrance points the mighty course
Thy defluent waters keep;
Advancing, with perpetual flow,
Through banks still widening as they go,
To mingle with the deep;
Emblemed in thee, my thoughts survey
Unruffled childhood's peaceful hours,
And blooming youth's delightful way
Through sunny fields and roseate bowers.

The passage continues:

And thus the scenes of life expand
Till death draws forth, with steady hand,
Our names from his capacious urn;
And dooms alike the base and good
To pass that all-absorbing flood,
O'er which is no return.²³

These conventional sentiments are made more conventional by being isolated from the national development and its controversies which, as Peacock's letter shows, the Thames instantiates and represents. The poem becomes, therefore, a refuge for the personal; it stays at one remove from the political and the disputed. Meanwhile, the individual's life is presented as a triumphal march. 'Advancing [...] Through banks still widening', it parallels the nation's rise, yet, within the lines, that connection is disguised. Likewise, while the river presents emblems of 'Unruffled childhood' and 'blooming youth', the later 'scenes of life' are more vaguely shown; they simply 'expand | Till death'. By this, the engagements with the world required of adulthood are again glossed over, lost in the poet's contemplation of beginning and end.

to advance like Thee

The achievement of Wordsworth's *The River Duddon* is to bring into the meditative arena of poetry, these points of conflict and possibilities of self-challenge. The sequence, while it links the shape of a river's life to that of a person, as Peacock does, also contains several moments of unexpected reversal. The progressive advance from lonely, barren mountain-top to a 'Cottage rude and grey', in sonnet 5, found among 'green alders [...] ashes [...] And birch-trees', is followed in sonnet 6, titled 'Flowers', by a backward look:

Ere yet our course was graced with social trees
It lacked not old remains of hawthorn bowers,
Where small birds warbled to their paramours;
And, earlier still, was heard the hum of bees

Up there were wild strawberries, 'trembling eyebright' and thyme, all admired equally: 'All kinds alike seemed favourites of Heaven' (sonnet 6, 1-4, 10, 14). As soon as he enters a social world, Wordsworth's thinking loops back, and then further back, into the pastorals of childhood (where there was no hierarchy of beauty and no accepted canons of taste). Sonnet 7 then continues this thought, contrasting the ambitions of 'the love-sick Stripling' with 'the calmer mind':

content

To be an unculled floweret of the glen,
Fearless of plough and scythe; or darkling wren
That tunes on Duddon's banks her slender voice.

(sonnet 7, 11-14)

The two sonnets, 6 and 7, create an eddy in the sequence as a while, not so much a digression from its predominant narrative movement as a recoiling whirlpool within it. Moreover, the sense he has of the 'unculled' (evoking Edenic innocence and Milton's Proserpine on the fields of Enna) prompts Wordsworth to imagine, in sonnet 8, the first invaders of the valley. 'Was the intruder nursed | In hideous usages, and rights accursed', he asks. Doubts about the benefits of entering adult life lead into doubts about the value of history's transitions – changes which are widely assumed to be civilising and progressive but may be destructive.

The same recursive pattern re-appears, this time as an element in life-experience, when Wordsworth reaches the 'barn and byre, and spouting mill' in sonnet 13. The river, he finds in the next sonnet, withdraws at once and without explanation from the 'Open Prospect' (the title of sonnet 13) and 'all the merry pranks of Donnerdale' (sonnet 13, 14).

Thee hath some awful Spirit impelled to leave,
Utterly to desert the haunts of men [...]
And through this wilderness a passage cleave
Attended but by thy own voice

(sonnet 14, 9-10, 12-13)

In the following sonnets, the passage through the wilderness tracks back into the depths of time, as the speaker finds a 'gloomy NICHE' high up on the walls of the river's 'deep chasm' (sonnet 15, 1, 3) and asks whether it was made by man, or vulcanism or flood. Then, prompted by a stone circle, he recalls Viking and Roman invaders of the Druid's prehistoric land (sonnet 17, 'Return'). The river's smooth and widening descent is interrupted by inexplicable shifts and regressions; history, likewise, does not submit to the pattern which progress seeks to impose, and, as in a person's life, forces, mysterious and unaccountable, may intervene. 'The blind walk of mortal accident' has the features, sometimes, of 'some awful Spirit', disruptive and all-powerful, entering an individual's biography in the same way that a volcano or flood may drive history off-course. Retrospection does not occur within a serene progress, retrogression threatens that advance.

In 'After-Thought', by contrast, a moment of retrospection brings a glimpse of permanence and re-established pattern and, with that, arises a feeling of calm:

*For, backward, Duddon! as I cast my eyes,
I see what was, and is, and will abide;*
(sonnet 34, 3-4; italics original)

The lines do not stand in isolation, however; they echo an earlier 'parting glance, no negligent adieu' in sonnet 4; at that point Wordsworth bids farewell to the 'cradled Nursling' of the mountains as it descends into the valley and undergoes 'A Protean change'.

Starts from a dizzy steep the undaunted Rill
Robed instantly in garb of snow-white foam;
And laughing dares the Adventurer, who hath clomb
So high, a rival purpose to fulfil;
Else let the dastard backward wend, and roam,

Seeking less bold achievement, where he will!
(sonnet 4, 1-3, 9-14)²⁴

That river's wild freedom becomes a challenge – it 'dares the Adventurer' – and yet how can they respond? Only by climbing higher, Wordsworth seems to say: by going in the opposite direction 'a rival purpose to fulfil'. It is impossible to emulate the stream's carefree, undaunted changes, its daring and its power of transformation. That impossibility reveals the difference between youth as experienced – in its glad animal movements – and youth as remembered. The human desire to climb back up the stream of time, to recapture in memory the past, runs up against the indifference to the future, the fearlessness, the ignorance of mortality that characterises youth itself. Yet youth inspires daring in the adult; recollecting childhood makes the grown person ambitious for their own bold achievement. Youth's prompting is, moreover, bold and provocative – 'dastard' is contemptuous, 'where he will' is dismissive. Authority 'led by a Child' is teased and cajoled by a voice fearless of rivalry and unashamed about being competitive.

Likewise, in the second to last of the sonnets, Wordsworth introduces a further disruption to pattern. Between the comparison with 'sovereign Thames', in sonnet 32, and the more personal reflection, in 'After-Thought', on mortality and eternal destiny, Wordsworth places sonnet 33, which is both combative and rousing. Against the nationalist sentiments of sonnet 32, its successor declares:

But here no cannon thunders in the gale;
Upon the wave no haughty pendants cast
A crimson splendour

The Duddon remains the keeper of 'lowly' and local, 'unambitious' life and, in keeping with this, Wordsworth insists here on restricting his comparisons to those between river and individual. As the Duddon now 'seeks that receptacle vast' of the ocean, so:

may thy Poet, cloud-born Stream! be free—
The sweets of earth contentedly resigned,
And each tumultuous working left behind
At seemly distance—to advance like Thee;
Prepared, in peace of heart, in calm of mind
And soul, to mingle with Eternity!
(sonnet 32, 1-3, 7-8, 9-14)

This is a more muted effect than the clashes produced by the sequence earlier on. Possibly, this later sonnet's degree of stylistic unevenness is in tune with the philosophic mind of advancing years. Nonetheless, a firm and surprising purposefulness can be discerned in Wordsworth's 'advance' and 'Prepared'. The words lend a military inflection to the forward movement, a rigour that is fruitfully at odds with the idea of mingling.²⁵

Sonnet 32 articulates the determination of a single person to go on into death – the progress of the nation being irrelevant to that. Its lines pursue the resolution to become independent. This exercise of will, and the preparation of self, precede, moreover, the serene faith expressed in 'After-Thought'. The stream 'glides' and 'shall for ever glide'; individuals and their lives do 'mingle with Eternity'. Yet, in tension with that idea of the self being dispersed into nature, Wordsworth continues to evoke separateness; he emphasises the individual person's focus and desire – their being 'Prepared' 'to advance'.

conglobated bubbles undissolved

The criss-crossing in the sequence between different feelings and perspectives both unsettles a smooth flow – the smooth enthrallment of wishful thinking – and creates a new, ‘unruly’ flow of its own, one that is energised by the life of a distinctive, unique point of view. A sequence of sonnets is an ideal form in which to generate the impression of a mind basking and plunging and basking again. Likewise, within the sequence, separate units may ‘cross’ one another. The familiar metaphors which impose a triumphalist narrative on the path of a river are ‘exposed to [...] accident’.²⁶ Wordsworth finds in the Duddon valley, ‘Wild shapes for many a strange comparison’ and the ‘toys of fancy thickly set’. In place of ‘Peculiar ground for hope to build upon’ and supply material for ‘verse, a speaking monument’, he sees ‘a gleam | Of brilliant moss, instinct with freshness rare’.²⁷ The river does not submit to the pattern and the metaphors the poet would, normatively, place upon it. Its repetition of both is fresh and strange, just as every life is new.

The sequence argues, then, for a confederate and interdependent understanding of the English nation, contesting the centralising and imperialist claims made for and via the River Thames. Its style also resists the authority of received ideas about (and assumed understandings of rivers), even while it employs these. The freshness of this river, itself, Wordsworth is eager to preserve, just as he seeks to keep alive the energies of youth in the adult mind. The sequence brings out, furthermore, a progressive possibility in the idea of crossing.

As the Duddon descends, it ‘is grown’:

Into a Brook of loud and stately march,
Crossed ever and anon by plank or arch;
And, for like use, lo! what might seem a zone
Chosen for ornament – stone matched with stone
(sonnet 9, 1-5)

These are the ‘Stepping-Stones’ of this sonnet’s title. A child ‘Puts [...] His budding courage to the proof’ by walking on them and an old man, attempting the same, ‘learns to note the sly | And sure encroachments of infirmity’ (lines 10-11, 12-13). As a river widens, it becomes inevitably harder to cross; bridges become both rarer and more significant. And, like the river’s descent overall, the worsening difficulty in making a crossing invites comparison with aging. A child, in the river’s headwaters, could enjoy stepping or jumping across the water time and again, as it wove its way among the moss and heather. For the adult, crossing must be a more considered act: more needful, more challenging and one that has to take into account the ‘encroachments of infirmity’. Yet, once again, this ‘crossing’ leads to continuity: it joins together regions – counties and countries – divided by the wide waters flowing between them.²⁸

Rather than providing an image of the childhood self being gradually socialised in adulthood and then dissolved in death back into a natural continuum, the river in Wordsworth shows the individual moved by widening social relations into a fuller realisation of self and prompted by aging to a more self-conscious and deliberate practice of childhood’s instinctive behaviours. Progress is less towards nation-building than towards the creation of selves, out of whose self-assertive ‘crossing’ communities may be built.

In bringing these new meanings out of the river, Wordsworth is, furthermore, responding to its distinctive, liquid nature. At the end of Book 3 of *The Excursion*, the ‘Solitary’ concludes his account of his past life by asking his hearers to ‘spare your pity [...] for I exist | Within myself, not comfortless.’ This claim, he then develops through an extended simile, comparing ‘The tenour | Which my life holds’ to ‘a mountain brook | In some still passage of its course’. Visible on the ‘glassy surface’ of such a pool are:

Specks of foam,
And conglobated bubbles undissolved,
Numerous as stars; that, by their onward lapse
Betray to sight the motion of the stream,
Else imperceptible.

These ‘floating isles’, the Solitary explains, ‘make known | Through what perplexing labyrinths [...] The earth-born wanderer hath passed’ and what ‘That respite o’er, like traverses and toils | Must he again encounter.’²⁹ Liquids (and, thanks to its high-surface tension, water in particular) never exhibit pure fluidity. Their intermolecular bonds mean they will form droplets, turbulence and, as here, ‘conglobated bubbles’. Particulate theories of matter were emerging in the Romantic period.³⁰ These carry the implication that in the flow of a liquid whole, parts persist; hence, within nature, selves persist.

In sonnet 33 of *The River Duddon*, Wordsworth sounds determined to advance firmly into death, being ‘Prepared’ for that ‘in peace of heart, in calm of mind’ and his resolution is conveyed by the clear and steady parallelism of these phrases. The steadiness and clarity are then awkwardly disrupted by the addition of ‘And soul’, across the ending of the line. ‘Soul’ seems to persist, unaccommodated and ‘undissolved’. Wordsworth is resolved but some part of him is not subsumed in resolution; his soul is not crushed by stern acceptance of the inevitable. Hence, even as it comes to ‘mingle with Eternity’, it is not lost.³¹ This is another moment when Wordsworth’s voice ‘crosses’ its own progress, moving forward as a river does, eddying and swirling – as a life does and a national history. It is a final instance in *The River Duddon* of Wordsworth’s will to discover in the river both ‘my partner and my guide’ (‘After-Thought’, 1)

¹ This article is based on a paper delivered at the Wordsworth Summer Conference in 2013. I benefitted greatly from the discussion on that occasion.

² William Wordsworth, *The Prelude: The Four Texts (1798, 1799, 1805, 1850)*, edited Jonathan Wordsworth (London: Penguin, 1995), 520). Hereafter *Prelude: The Four Texts*. The equivalent passage in Wordsworth’s revised text (*Prelude* (1850), 14. 194-205) makes a number of changes in wording, particularly at the beginning and the end. The shape of Wordsworth’s thought remains unchanged.

³ On this, see Stewart C. Wilcox, ‘Wordsworth’s River Duddon sonnets’, *PMLA* 69 (1954), 131-41.

⁴ Daniel Robinson remarks, ‘critics still dismiss the sequence as a conventionally didactic loco-descriptive poem of Wordsworth’s later years’ (‘Still Glides the Stream’: Form and Function in Wordsworth’s *River Duddon* sonnets’, *European Romantic Review*, 13 (2002), 449-64 (450).)

⁵ The New Criticism and the New Historicism agreed on Wordsworth’s poetic decline in middle-age. This consensus has been brilliantly contested by Sally Bushell, in her *Re-Reading The Excursion: Narrative, Response and the Wordsworthian Dramatic Voice* (first published, 2002; London: Routledge, 2016); see also Kevis Goodman, *Georgic Modernity and British Romanticism: Poetry and the Mediations of History* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 142: ‘The poem [*The Excursion*] once chastised by Geoffrey Hartman for offering us “not a vision, but a voice” – even worse, a “flight from vision that causes a warp of obliquity” – for that very same reason also provokes and stages a disturbance in the ear’. W. Michael Johnstone, in ‘Towards a Book History of Wordsworth’s 1850 *Prelude*’, *Textual Cultures: Texts, Contexts, Interpretation*, 5: 2 (Autumn 2010), 63-91, observes that ‘Today, the 1850 first edition of Wordsworth’s autobiographical poem *The Prelude* [...] is a *liber non gratus*, a book, unwelcome, unaccepted, unrecognized.’ (63) For a re-evaluation of Wordsworth’s later poetry, see also Tim Fulford, *The Late Poetry and the Lake Poets: Romanticism Revised* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2013), 197-278

⁶ *Prelude: The Four Texts*, 52, 53.

⁷ Compare the ‘Motley accoutrement’ of ‘Nutting’, l. 10, William Wordsworth and Samuel Taylor Coleridge, *Lyrical Ballads: 1798 and 1802*, edited by Fiona Stafford (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013), 257.

⁸ Again ‘Nutting’ could be compared. It begins: ‘It seems a day | (I speak of one from many singled out) | One of those heavenly days which cannot die’ (ll. 1-3, *Lyrical Ballads*, 256). The undying object, fixed in memory, is placed within sequentiality and process by the parenthesis. The mind’s ‘singling out’ of that day – one among so many – parallels the swimming and leaping and resting that Wordsworth remembers in his ‘one long bathing’.

⁹ This was ‘A little Mill-race severed from his stream’ in the 1805 text. In some versions, the 1805 text includes a comma after ‘plunged’. This gives a ‘steady cadence’ to the list of actions; in 1850, by taking out the second comma,

Wordsworth introduced greater spontaneity and rush into the iterations.

¹⁰ William Wordsworth, *The Poems*, edited John O. Hayden, 2 vols (New Haven and London: Yale University Press, 1977), II, 141. Reviewing the poem, Charles Lamb singled out this passage for praise: 'there is one thought so uncommonly fine, relative to the spirituality which lay hid beneath the gross material forms of Greek worship, in metal or stone, that we cannot resist the allurements of transcribing it' (Charles Lamb, *Selected Prose*, ed. Adam Phillips (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1985), 85.

¹¹ Quotations from Wordsworth are given in *OED* for definition 3: from *Prelude* (1850), Book 11, 93-4, 'With such general insight into evil | And of the bounds which sever it from good', and *Excursion*, Book 3, 125, 'Immense The space that severed us!'

¹² See Byron, *The Giaour*, 657-8, 827-8 and *Don Juan*, canto 8, 672; see also Wordsworth's, 'Simon Lee': 'I struck, and with a single blow | The tangled root I sever'd'. The speaker's action releases in Simon a tide of feeling: 'thanks and praises seemed to run | So fast out of his heart, I thought | They never would have done' (ll. 93-4, 98-100, 1798 text, *Lyrical Ballads* 47; the lines are unchanged in 1800 and 1802 editions).

¹³ *Prelude: The Four Texts* 446, 450, 454.

¹⁴ *Prelude: The Four Texts* 455. The changes in punctuation are again interesting: the 1805 text builds in confidence, through enlarging clauses, to the point where the voice is 'caught at every turn'; in 1850, the punctuation establishes a rhythm in which the speaker sounds more enraptured and less excited; the difference between the two versions is comparable to that between 'coursed' and 'scoured' above.

¹⁵ Wordsworth's work includes many poems that feature blunt interjections and challenges, with often firm rejoinders – in 'We Are Seven' and 'The Sailor's Mother', among others. The desire to smooth over difference is, likewise, viewed with suspicion (as in 'The Fountain' for example) or seen as both seductive and doubtful. The 'kettle whispering its faint undersong' in 'Personal Talk' grants the speaker 'Smooth passions, smooth discourse' and in its presence, his 'little boat | Rocks in its harbour, lodging peaceably'. The poem concludes with this self-consoling reformulation of the feeling, something close to oblivion, with which it began: 'To sit without emotion, hope or aim'. Being 'crossed' by another voice is unsettling, therefore, but much needed – in order to disrupt anomie and narcissism, withdrawal and presumption. The apostrophe in the 'Ode to Duty', addresses Duty as 'Stern Daughter of the Voice of God!' and later 'Stern Lawgiver!'. Both moments interrupt a smoothness that is becoming mere drift: 'I long for a repose that ever is the same.' (*Lyrical Ballads*, 49, 254; Wordsworth, *The Poems* I, 512, 566-8, 605-6).

¹⁶ *Prelude: The Four Texts* 120, 138, 142.

¹⁷ *Prelude: The Four Texts* 143.

¹⁸ *Prelude* (1850), Book 3, 604-6; the equivalent passage in 1805 (Book 3, 639-41) is identical, as is the rest of the verse paragraph (*Prelude: The Four Texts*, 136-9).

¹⁹ *The River Duddon*, sonnet 2, 1-2; sonnet 5, 10; sonnet 19, title; sonnet 23, 10; sonnet 32, 9-14.

²⁰ *Descriptions of the Views on the Thames engraved by W.B Cooke and G. Cooke* (London: John Murray, 1818), no page nos.

²¹ Mr and Mrs C. Hall, *The Book of the Thames: From its Rise to its Fall* (London: Arthur Hall, 1859), 'The Authors to the Public', no page nos.

²² Thomas Love Peacock to Edward Thomas Hookham, 6-8/06/1809, *The Letters of Thomas Love Peacock*, edited Nicholas A. Joukovsky, 2 vols (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 2001), I, 35. Rachel Crawford shows how the celebratory language of eighteenth-century georgic (parodied here by Peacock) focussed on technological innovations as the characteristic achievements of early capitalist England. See her, *Poetry, Enclosure, and the Vernacular Landscape, 1700-1830* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2002) and see David Fairer's review, *Romanticism on the Net*, 41-42 (2006). Present-day critique of eighteenth-century ambitions may, however, be coloured by nostalgia for the pre-industrial. The English canal network draws out a present-day clash between ruralist feelings and the celebration of industrial heritage. More positively, canals offer the opportunity to encounter and conceive of sustainable forms of capitalist infrastructure.

²³ Thomas Love Peacock, 'The Genius of the Thames' (1810), Part 2, ll. 111-126, *The Works of Thomas Love Peacock*, edited H. F. B. Brett-Smith and C. E. Jones, 10 vols (London and New York: Constable and Gabriel Wells, 1924-34), VI (1927), 137.

²⁴ The 'Protean change' leads to an Ovidian moment of metamorphosis when the stream becomes a waterfall and is 'Robed' in a 'garb' of foam. In canto 34 of the *Inferno*, Dante and Virgil escape Hell by climbing up the path of a stream; their ascent leads them to a shoreline, with the mountain of Purgatory still before them. It is curious that *The River Duddon* contains 34 sonnets.

²⁵ The lines echo perhaps the end of Bunyan's *Pilgrim's Progress*, when Christian walks, intent and resolved, onward through the Jordan, the river of death.

²⁶ The fame of 'After-Thought' has tended to isolate it from this original dialogic context. Its echo of his 'Remembrance of Collins' – 'Glide gently, thus for ever glide | O Thames!' – needs also to be borne in mind (*Lyrical Ballads* 281). Wordsworth's thinking about the potential of a sequence, advancing step-by-step, may have been influenced by Coleridge whose revision of his periodical *The Friend* (1809-10) for publication as a book in 1818, introduced 'Landing-Places', as on a staircase, giving the reader opportunity to look backward and forward. In chapter 7 of *Biographia Literaria* (1817), similarly, he compared the thinking process to a water-insect, advancing, flowing back and

advancing again along the surface of a stream (Coleridge, *Biographia Literaria*, ed. James Engell and Walter Jackson Bate, 2 vols (London and Princeton N. J.: Routledge and Kegan Paul and Princeton University Press, 1983), I, 124).

²⁷ *The River Duddon*, sonnet 3, 3, 8, 12-13 and sonnet 12, 'Hints for the Fancy', 4 and 12.

²⁸ Bridge-building was being revolutionised in the period by the new 'bridges of suspension'. In 1819, work began on Thomas Telford's Menai bridge, linking Anglesey to the mainland of Wales; it was completed in 1826. The 'Union Bridge' joining England and Scotland was built in 1820, and is still standing. It was described at its opening in rhapsodic terms: 'such is the extent, and its light and elegant appearance, that it has not inaptly been compared to an inverted rainbow' (Robert Stevenson, 'Description of Bridges of Suspension', in *The Edinburgh Philosophical Journal*, 5: 10 (1821), 251).

²⁹ *The Excursion*, Book 3, 965-8, 969-70, 973-7, 981-6. Wordsworth may have in his mind Milton's account of the creation in *Paradise Lost* Book 7, particularly the stage when the spirit of God 'conglob'd | Like things to like, the rest to several place | Disparted' (235, 239-41).

³⁰ John Dalton first proposed his atomic theory in his paper, 'On the Absorption of Gases by Water and other Liquids', read in 1803 and published in *Memoirs of the Literary and Philosophical Society of Manchester* 2nd series, 6 (1805), 271-28. Dalton was born in 1766 in Eaglesfield, near Cocker mouth in Cumberland, where Wordsworth was born in 1770. On the development of particulate theories, see Marie Boas, 'Structure of Matter and Chemical Theories in the Seventeenth and Eighteenth Centuries', *Critical Problems in the History of Science*, ed. Marshall Clagett (Madison, Milwaukee, London: University of Wisconsin Press, 1969), 499-513

³¹ The *OED* defines blending as 'to mix [...] become physically united' and also as to 'join in any kind of association with [...] to move about among'; the quotations show that both senses were current in 1820.